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ABSTRACT

Focusing particularly on communication as a discipline, this paper is a review and synthesis of literature about scholarly communication in the social sciences. Drawing from literature about ferment in the communication discipline, from information science, the sociology of knowledge, and the philosophy of social science, the paper argues that social theories do not and need not fall within disciplinary boundaries. The paper observes that many of the reasons why disciplines come to be defined as they do is more related to historical accident than to conceptual rigor. Institutional inertia exerts a powerful restraint against interdisciplinary social research through the maintenance of academic departments, associations and journals and the reward structures they impose. However, the mere fact of the existence of these forces is not a conceptually defensible basis for discouraging interdisciplinary research. The paper also argues that the ubiquity of human communication demands a theoretical perspective that is not subject to rigid boundaries of specialization. The felt need to develop a paradigm of communication is evidenced in the recent literature about intellectual ferment among communication scholars. The paper notes that communication theory has begun to be equated with social theory in general through the work of scholars such as Habermas. In that light, human communication can be seen as a central element in all social research. This is a unique feature that sets communication apart as an interdisciplinary "discipline." (A four-page bibliography and 15 notes are attached.) (Author/JK)

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ABSTRACT

This paper is a review and synthesis of literature about scholarly communication in the social sciences, focusing particularly on the discipline of communication. Drawing from literature about ferment in the communication discipline, from information science, the sociology of knowledge, and the philosophy of social science, it is argued that social theories do not and need not fall within disciplinary boundaries. It is observed that many of the reasons why disciplines come to be defined as they do are more related to historical accident than with conceptual rigor. Institutional inertia exerts a powerful restraint against interdisicplinary social research through the maintenance of academic departments, associations and journals and the reward structures they impose. However, the mere fact of the existence of these forces is not a conceptually defensible basis for discouraging interdisciplinary research. It is argued that the ubiquity of human communication demands a theoretical perspective that is not subject to rigid boundaries of specialization. The felt need to develop a paradigm of communication is evidenced in the recent literature about intellectual ferment among communication scholars. The paper notes that communication theory has begun to be equated with social theory in general through the work of scholars such as Habermas. In that light, human communication can be seen as a central element in all social research. This is a unique feature that sets communication apart as an interdisciplinary "discipline."

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is about the idea and nature of communication as a discipline.[1] It does not appear to be just a public relations gap that prevents us from stating clearly what unifies the discipline of communication. This paper reflects on some of the ways in which the search for a general theory of communication is constrained by the intellectual space occupied by other social science disciplines. It also notes that the nature of communication as a phenomenon demands that research about it be interdisciplinary.

In attempting to define the discipline according to a theory, we seem to be at cross-purposes. On the one hand, there are the institutional rather than theoretical forces from within the existing discipline working against this. On the other hand, there are the external constraints imposed by other disciplines. Developing a theory around which a communication discipline can be unified requires greater integration from within the historically legitimized domains of communication research. It also requires overlap with a great deal of subject matter from other disciplines. The inherent contradiction in this comes as much from the ways in which other disciplines have defined themselves as it has from the ways in which the field of communication has come to be defined historically. In other words, this is not a problem which can be solved without relating the communication to other disciplines. It is an *inter* disciplinary issue as much as an intradisciplinary one.

The choice to develop a discipline based on general theory of communication would have to rest on one of two premises: It can either require the integration of all social science disciplines, or it can remain

based as it is in a "discipline" of communication that serves an administrative rather than a conceputally unified function.[2] Given the greater desirability of the former, but the greater likelihood of the continuation of the latter, this paper examines how communication research can be strengthened from within existing institutional constraints. To the extent that disciplinary boundaries of academic institutions are criticized, it is not generally as advocacy for the abolishment of manageable administrative units. It is, however, critical of inflexibility in the maintenance of discplinary boundaries.

Schramm (1983) recently has expressed the desire for a unified human science and Paisley (1984) among others hopes to place communication at the head of it. In a recent attempt to provide an overview of current efforts towards grand theory in the human sciences, several theorists (including Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Jurgen Habermas and Thomas Kuhn) are shown to have placed a central focus on human communication in their perspectives (Skinner, 1985). Whether it is reasonable to place much hope in the potential for pandisciplinary consensus on a grand theory in the human sciences is a subject of great controversy today. The modernist/postmodernist debate rests largely on the worthiness of the pursuit of grand theory (Lyotard, 1984; Bernstein, et al., 1985). This is a fundamental issue which requires resolution and consensus prior to any reasonable expection about consensus on a given general theory. This paper does not attempt to argue whether it is worthwhile to pursue grand theory, except to acknowledge the general lack of consensus for the human sciences in general, and communication in particular. Instead, the focus here is on practical issues in dealing with the

present institutional constraints of academic disciplines in the absence of such a theory.

THE IDEA OF COMMUNICATION AS A "DISCIPLINE"

A public and self-reflective search for acceptable approaches to a general theory of communication has occupied scholars in our discipline for at least twelve years.[3] Peters (1986), in a discussion of some of the merits and problems with the existence of the field, argues that communication suffers from the lack of a theoretically unified mission. He notes two equally unlikely alternatives, radical surgery or the creation of a universally accepted general theory of communication:

1) *radical surgery:* This would require cutting out areas of the field which have not or can not be satisfactorily integrated on a conceptual basis. Peters notes that definitions of the field have been presented "in terms of particular objects of study" (p.550). He notes how some leaders in the field define communication from an interpersonal perspective, to the exclusion of mass communication, while others do the exact opposite. The potential need for radical surgery emerges from his observation that:

> The current diversity is the fallout of an earlier day when it was still possible to take seriously the idea that communication provided a license to study anything, an idea one finds in spirits as diverse as Schramm and McLuhan (p.550).

The question raised in suggesting radical surgery is what would be the appropriate place to start in spinning off domains viewed as having less than central relevance? Equally important would be the question of

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who should make these decisions. Asking a prominent health communication specialist may yield a radically different response than asking an expert on media institutions. Depending on background and focus, two scholars who study the social effects of the new media may disagree on whether development economics is a relevant subject. Of course this alternative to the search for common ground has occurred in some departments of communication, particularly where it marks a split between media studies and interpersonal communication. In conclusion, the domain of relevant phenomena for communication research has not been established.

2) *create a general theory of communication:* This would involve establishing a single theoretical perspective[4] around which the discipline of communication could be centered. Peters notes that information theory was an attempt at this, though it failed. He recognizes that the problem with a general theory is that it can not be confined to the domain staked out by the institutionalized discipline of communication:

> Such a theory, if truly general, could not be contained within a specific social science discipline, for it would legitimately be expected to account for everything social. Hence the dream of a general theory usually goes together with a hope that borders within the social sciences will one day dissolve (p.550).

In sum, Peters offers a fair assessment of the dilemma communication as a discipline faces, one which exists between arbitrary narrowness and unwieldy overbreadth. He notes that the "edifying essays" and "institutional apologetics," written by Schramm and other founders of the discipline, helped to build communication as an intellectual "nation state...a fact of power, not of reason" (p.545). Of course, it makes much more sense

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to have a theory-centered discipline rather than a discipline into which theories are made to fit, given the choice.

Many communication scholars who are interested in developing a general theory of communication have recognized the need to re-negotiate the field's relationship to other social science disciplines. For example, Gans (1983) notes that the news media are *political institutions* and studies about them cannot avoid policy-oriented analysis. Critical studies of communication, with their emphases on ideology and political economy, often draw from aesthetics, linguistics, philosophy, psychology, and sociology. The list of fields with which scholars in communication departments across the country have strong links is extensive. In addition to the ones named above, it includes political science, electrical engineering, computer and information science, and history.

In sum, instead of a conceptually coherent whole we have claimed exclusive rights to certain subareas of communication (e.g., health, organizational and political communication, popular culture, mass media institutions, new technology) jammed together in departments and journals, but we have not managed to create a theoretically unified discipline. This raises the question of whether communication is the only discipline with boundaries based on the facts of historical accident.

WE ARE NOT ALONE

Peters (1986) notes that communication is a *topic* that is treated as a discipline. A key question is whether communication is alone in this respect. A first step in answering it may be in trying to identify how the

concept of a "discipline" is operationalized, both bureaucratically and substantively, in other disciplines. Campbell (1969) views present disciplines as "arbitrary composites," concluding that the present organization of academic departments as a product largely of historical accident. For example, he concludes that:

> ...*anthropology* is a hodgepodge of all novelties that struck the scholarly tourist's eye when venturing into exotic lands...
>
> ...*sociology* is a study of...individual persons in social settings, of aggregates of persons in social settings, of aggregates of person data losing both personal and institutional identity, and of interactions which are neither persons nor groups...
>
> ...*psychology* is a hodgepodge of sensitive subjective biography, of brain operations, of school achievement testing, of factor analysis, of Markov process mathematics, of schizophrenic families, of laboratory experiments on group structure in which persons are anonymous...
>
> ...*political science* is a hodgepodge of political entities as actors and persons as actors, of humanistic description and scientific generalization, of history and of social psychology (pp.331-332).

Other sociologists of knowledge[5] side with Campbell in concluding that all disciplines have sets of boundaries that serve bureaucratic rather than intellectually organized functions (e.g., Bourdieu, 1975; Chubin et al., 1986; Drantz & Wiggins, 1973; Garvey & Griffith, 1972; Knorr-Cetina, 1981; Merton, 1973; Mulkay, 1974; Overington, 1977; Wallis, 1979). For example, Bourdieu (1975) argues that a principle issue at stake in defining disciplines is scientific authority, defined inseparably as *both technical capacity and social power*, the latter playing a fundamental role in the establishment and maintenance of disciplinary boundaries. For Chubin, et al. (1986):

> ...disciplines represent historical, evolutionary aggregates of shared scholarly interests. These aggregates gain legitimacy in the university as "departments." As organizational niches, departments bureaucratize knowledge by subject matter and stake a claim to research and train students in it (pp.4-5).

Based on this discussion, communication does not seem far from the mark of other disciplines with respect to the arbitrariness of its borders. Neither does it seem to be alone in the sense that these borders make it necessary to tailor one's inquiries to fit institutional constraints or suffer the potential consequences.[6] Saxberg et al. (1981) observe that the university reward system rests within the departmental structure. Hagstrom (1965) notes that conformity to disciplinary structure is maintained by the use of formal sanctions such as the denial of appointments or of access to communication channels. Galbraith (1986) calls the pressure to conform during the tenure race "academic cloning," and sees it as a greater threat to academic freedom than firing professors.

It should be clear that communication as a discipline is not unique in the ways in which bureaucratic structures impose themselves on intellectual pursuits. These are academy-wide concerns. The question this raises is whether there is anything particular to communication which *sets it apart* with respect to these concerns.

COMMUNICATION IS A VARIABLE FIELD

In a sociological analysis of the communication discipline, Paisley (1984) classifies disciplines as either "level" or "variable"[7] fields. A level field is one which encompasses a level of analysis by virtue of its place

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along a continuum from behavioral science, to biological science and, at the most fundamental level, physical science. Psychology is a level field because it deals with the individual mind while sociology is a level field because it deals with collectivities of individuals. Physiology and biochemistry each occupies its own unique level of analysis within biology. In contrast to a level field, a variable field cuts across levels. Such disciplines as political science, economics, and communication are variable fields, each having a focal variable. Paisley notes that as a variable field communication has little or no *intrinsic content* but it can take on diverse content.

Paisley notes that a unique problem for variable fields is the blurred line which exists between theory and practice. As a variable field, communication researchers have less access to neutral funding sources than level fields, and depend increasingly on research funds from institutions in the information industry.[8] Consequently, the research agenda generally is not directed by the researcher to the same degree as when a funding agency with less directly vested interests is paying for the study. Pedagogy in communication experiences a theory/practice conflict as well, found for example in the distinction between those "studying the mass media" and those "studying to be *in* the mass media" (p.32). In contrast, one does not train to become an engineer in a physics department. Another distinguishing feature of variable fields is that association memberships tend to include more practitioners, due in part to looser membership requirements which permit small variable field associations[9] to remain solvent.

As a result of these theory/practice links, a great deal of communication research, particulary in media and organizational studies, is

tailored to problem-centered inquiry. A growing tendency today is to view the essential tasks of scholars as problem-centered, not discipline-centered (cf. Klein, 1985). The basic argument made by those holding this perspective is that real problems rarely come in discipline-shaped boxes. Thus the growth in university support for interdisciplinary research (Chubin et al., 1986). Saxberg et al., (1981) note, however, that interdisciplinary research activities and centers generally do not enjoy the same degree of commitment and support from university administrations as do academic departments.

Given that communication is a variable field, a unique benefit for scholars in the field is that they enjoy some degree of bureaucratic security for doing interdisciplinary research. Communication is a ubiquitous process that cannot be made the exclusive domain of a single discipline as it currently is formed. No one would argue that it would be ridiculous to try and extract communication from other social sciences and humanities disciplines since, as Paisley (1984) notes, communication has no intrinsic content. Likewise it would foolish to try and rationally define the phenomenon of communication without acknowledging its span across the domains of all of the humanities and social sciences, a subject discussed below.

THE SOCIAL SCIENCE-HUMANITIES CONNECTION IN COMMUNICATION

The field of communication has strong roots in the humanities, derived from the study of classical and British rhetorical theory (Golden et al., 1983). The early connections and subsequent distinction between

rhetorical criticism and the humanities tradition of literary criticism (Wichelns, 1958[10]) made the former a basis for a unique discipline of communication. Hermeneutics, a humanities tradition stemming from theological analysis of religious texts, now is applied to the study of communication (Apel, 1977; Stewart & Philipsen, 1984). In support of a hermeneutic approach, Apel argues that "intersubjective communication" serves as the "ideal frame of the humanities" (p.306).

More recently "cultural studies," focused on the relationship between cultural practices and society and typically based on (or in conscious refutation of) philosophical perspectives developed by Marx or Freud, is having an important influence across the humanities and social sciences, including communication (Johnson, 1987). Other specific and general examples can be found to demonstrate that the interdisciplinary nature of communication spans not only the social sciences (e.g., economics, political science, psychology, sociology) but also the humanities (e.g., literature, art, philosophy). Any general theory of communication would have to do so as well.

Evidence that scholars in communication behave on the whole as "humanists" as much as "social scientists" can be found in their publishing practices. The literature base of the humanist generally is not as narrowly defined as that of the scientist. Frequency of use of many important works is low and the reach is broad (Immroth, 1974). In contrast, the use of scientific literature tends often to be deeper than it is wide, with an intensive focus on incremental progress within a narrow specialty (Subramanyam, 1979).[11] Reeves & Borgman (1983) note that the citation pattern among scholars publishing in seven core communication journals[12] is remarkably scattered in comparison with other social sciences, which

they attribute to the interdisciplinary nature of communication.[13] It is reasonable to assume that with further analysis one would find citation patterns ranging across a broad body of what generally would be considered "humanities" literature.[14]

In summary, there is reasonable evidence to claim that the practice of communication research is an interdisciplinary one with respect to the social sciences, it is also the same with respect to the humanities.

INVISIBLE COLLEGES: AN ALTERNATIVE TO DISCIPLINARY DOGMATISM

In attempting to understand how it is that scholars in communication place a structure on this seemingly amorphous intellectual environment, one important answer would have to be through "invisible colleges." Kuhn (1970) describes the following hierarchy of organization among scientific communities:

> globally, i.e., all scientists;
>
> "the main scientific professional communities" (physicists, chemists, astronomers, zoologists); and
>
> "major subgroups," such as "organic chemists, and perhaps protein chemists among them, solid-state and high-energy physicists, radio astronomers, and so on" (p.177).

He notes that it is at a fourth level that the scientific communities likely to have common empirical problems exist. These communities are more difficult to isolate and identify (thus the label "invisible college"). For the purposes of doing so, "one must have recourse to attendance at special conferences, to the distribution of draft manuscripts or galley proofs prior to publication, and above all to formal and informal communication

networks including those discovered in correspondence and in the linkages among citations" (1970, pp.177-178). He notes that such communities share:

> *symbolic generalizations*, or the specialized language shared by a scientific community;
>
> *models*, which "supply the group with preferred or permissible analogies and metaphors;"
>
> *values*, the shared understanding of concepts such as accuracy, plausibility, consistency, and simplicity; and
>
> *exemplars*, meaning "the concrete problem-solutions which a scientist encounters throughout his career through attending conferences, contacts with colleagues, and reading of current literature" (pp.181-187).

If the measure of unity within the field of communication is the degree to which there is discipline-wide sharing of symbolic generalizations, models, values and exemplars, then there does not appear to be great unity. Campbell (1969) has argued that "unidisciplinary competence" is a myth. His point is that today the degree of specialization and the sheer volume of information which falls within the boundaries of an academic discipline outstrips the ability of individuals to master it. By this he does not categorically reject the idea of academic disciplines. Rather, his argument is that the integration of a discipline should be treated as a collective activity, not an individual's task. He argues that a felt need to achieve competence across a discipline is a misuse of human resources:

> The temporary disciplinary breadth transiently achieved in graduate school is of course not undesriable -- the objection here is rather to the repetitious duplication of the same pattern of breadth to the exclusion of other breadths equally relevant but organizationally unsupported (pp.332-333).

Campbell proposes that academic disciplines avoid the temptation of training for unidisciplinary competence and instead promote "novel narrowness," the development of research specialties which overlap with one another in order to build towards collective rather than individual competence. To that end, Campbell advocates an ideal approach to graduate social science instruction where the deep knowledge of the specialist is shown to extend the broad knowledge of the collective. It is opposed to an ideal which seeks to make all students in a department conceptually and methodologically interchangeable. Similarly, many physicists today search simply for partial explanations of *limited domains* while simultaneously seeking consistency with theories addressing related or overlapping domains (Capra, 1982). Invisible colleges, with their problem-centered rather than discipline-centered approaches to knowledge, serve as the functional alternative in which scholars do in fact achieve novel narrowness.

Invisible colleges are more fleeting and permeable than formal disciplines because they are not weighted down by the apparatus of bureaucratized knowledge. An institutional discipline is simply a home where familiar ideas exist but not an ultimate stopping place, a fact that is acknowledged in practice by members of the discipline. There is a strong incentive for engaging in this type of informal activity rather than being limited to the dictates of disciplinary boundaires. Granoveteer (1973) notes that an exogenous influence on a network of like-minded individuals generally has a more powerful effect on information exchange and innovation within the network than do members from within the network. He calls this phenomenon "the strength of weak ties." From this perspective, scholars should continue to seek interdisciplinary exchange.

What invisible colleges[15] promote is exactly what is implicitly discouraged by disciplinary boundaries: the collegial contact needed to theorize in a problem-centered rather than a bureaucratically discipline-centered way.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, it is necessary to recognize the inevitability and desirability of disciplinary overlap, both across the humanities and the social sciences, for communication research. Academic disciplines do not seem particularly aligned with theories, and social inquiry about communication cannot reasonably be forced to reside wholly within the boundaries of any single discipline. Consequently, we should not be overly concerned with finding all of our theoretical and methodological resources from within our own discipline. While there are structural limitations placed on the degree to which a scholar may range across disciplines, this paper concludes that it is common practice, and even desirable, to not be bound conceputally by bureaucratic barriers. One important way in which this is done is through invisible colleges. It is in the interest of the growth of knowledge and the improvement of society that the words "academic discipline" not serve to place artificial limits on social inquiry.

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[1] I use the terms "field" and "discipline" interchangeably in this paper. Any distinctions made elsewhere by others do not apply here.

[2] Littlejohn (1983), in one of the most widely used texts on communication theory, acknowledges the lack of theoretical unity across the entire discipline: "The field of communication is so young that it has not produced much theory, so our knowledge of communication still relies primarily on an eclectic approach" (p.5). However, the reason he and others offer for this absence of unity (the youth of the discipline) has met with criticism recently and has been characterized as an unjustified escape hatch.

[3] Alternative epistemological perspectives were discussed at the SCA convention in Houston in 1975. The symposium was later published in an issue of *Communication*

Quarterly edited by Thomas W. Benson and W. Barnett Pearce, entitled "Alternative Theoretical Bases for the Study of Human Communication: A Symposium" (Winter 1977). Although the focus has changed, debate about the epistemological foundations of communication have continued, most recently found in the Summer 1983 issue of the *Journal of Communication* (issue title: "Ferment in the Field") and in the theme of the 1985 ICA convention in Honolulu ("Paradigm Dialogues").

[4] Dudley Shapere (in Suppe, 1977) notes that the very act of attempting to define a domain of relevant phenomena constitutes a fundamental act of theorizing.

[5] The operational definition of "knowledge" used by most American sociologists of knowledge, particularly as it is employed in the social sciences, manifests itself specifically in the study of scholarly activity. It is limited in that it tends to examine the relationship and relevance between research and practice only to the extent that research is affected by practice, but rarely vice-versa. Alternatively, by Foucault's (1972) definition, "...the ***knowledge*** of psychiatry in the nineteenth century is not the sum of what was thought to be true [by scholars], but the whole set of practices, singularities, and deviations of which one could speak in a psychiatric discourse" (p.182). Foucault's definition is a far broader one. The two definitions merit further comparison, but that task is beyond the scope of this paper.

[6] Peters concludes "...we are not free to think, but must keep one eye on the dean, one's source of funding or career" (p.541).

[7] Delia (1977) criticizes what he terms the "variable analytic tradition," defined as the study of discrete factors (variables) and their effects. This epistemological argument is beyond the scope of this paper. Paisley is concerned instead with the "variable" of communication in a very general sense that is not implicitly designed to exclude Delia's definition of the domain. However, I agree with Habermas (1971) who opposes "empiricism," the scientistic elevation of hypothetico-deductively tested statements about the covariance of events, as the only acceptable form of knowledge. Habermas is equally critical of elevating historical-hermeneutical approaches to a similar status.

[8] Paisley notes that interpersonal communication research is less constrained in this respect than media-related studies.

[9] The Speech Communication Association has approximately 6,000 members and the International Communication Association has 2,350 members. In contrast, the American Psychological Association has 58,000 members and the American Sociological Association has 12,000 members (Koek & Martin, 1987).

[10] In the essay "The Literary Criticism of Oratory," published initially in 1925, Herbert A. Wichelns makes the critical point that, unlike literary criticism, rhetorical criticism is concerned primarily with *effect* rather than with the permanence or beauty of the object of study.

[11] Subramanyam notes that G.B. Shaw's plays do not make Shakespeare's obsolete and Picasso's paintings do not replace Rembrandt's.

[12] *Journal of Communication, Journal of Broadcasting, Public Opinion Quarterly, Journalism Quarterly, Quarterly Journal of Speech, Human Communication Research, Central States Speech Journal.*

[13] They found that only 13% of citations were to journals within this core group.

[14] Speculation on why there seems to be an increasing tendency to characterize (and make) communication a social science rather than a humanities discipline may have

to do with the safety of apparent "facts" versus "values." Newell & Card (1985) provide an interesting illustration with their maxim derived from Gresham's law: "hard science drives out soft science." They argue that empricist approaches tend to win in socio-technical credibility races.

[15] The term "invisible college" originated in mid-17th century London when small groups of scientists and philosphers would meet clandestinely to avoid censorship and persecution (Subramanyam, 1979). The motivation for becoming "invisible" in the 17th century has metaphorical significance today. Rather than direct censorship and persecution, many of those discussed in this paper have made a strong case that today's bureaucratic academic structures have their own tacitly stifling effect, circumvented through invisible colleges.

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